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ABSTRACT

Observation of a kinship and social network among Mexican Americans in a Chicago neighborhood, part of an ethnographic study, revealed a pattern of self-education in literacy among the men in the group who came from one rancho, while the literate men from another rancho were primarily school-educated. Economic forces caused one group to attend school less consistently. While the self-educated men learned letters from someone else, they pursued literacy independently in a distinct social context. The process by which the men learned to read and spell words was remarkably similar to a process used by members of the working class in 17th century rural England; that is, informally and with the help of friends who themselves were not very literate. Observations revealed information about aspects of the process of literacy learning, the social nature of learning, and significant features of the setting providing the motivation for literacy learning. The Mexican men described the process as "lyrical" learning, accomplished on one's own, not always with a teacher, but purely with spoken language. Literacy was attained primarily to communicate and maintain traditionally close ties with family and friends in the home country. The men described the emotional support they received from the friends who taught them to write, and the trust between them. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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LEARNING LITERACY LYRICALLY:
INFORMAL EDUCATION AMONG MEXICANOS IN CHICAGO

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Pancho: "..lirico es el puro, eh, hablando vez, puro hablado, no hay nada, que no haya libros ni nada."

An interesting phenomenon has emerged from our on-going ethnographic study in a Mexican-origin neighborhood in Chicago. Quite a few of the men (who are all from one particular rancho in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico) have become funtionally literate essentially without formal schooling. Before discussing the details of this phenomenon, however, I'd like to describe the larger project briefly.

The larger project, "The Mexican-Origin Language and Literacy Project," has as its overall goal the description of oral and written language patterns and uses--in both Spanish and English--whicb are typical of this community. Initially funded by the National Science Foundation (Linguistics Program), we also have received funding from the U.S. Census Bureau. In the NSF study, we are focusing on one social network of Mexicano immigrants which comprises approximately 45 people. A social network (Milroy, 1980/87; Hannerz, 1980) consists of one center person or family--the latter in our case--and all of their immediate intimates in terms of kin and friendship. Social networks have been studied in various working class communities around the world, and while they are probably important for many U.S. immigrant groups (as a support and survival mechanism), they seem to be particularly important for Mexicanos because of compadrazgo. Compadrazgo refers to the Mexican system of godparent-like relationships which functions as a reciprocal

exchange network to facilitate economic survival and to provide emotional support. Our participant-observation agrees with that reported in Horowitz' (1983) study of gang members in the same neighborhood we are working in:

> Compadres and relatives usually make up an emotional and social support group. Women move freely back and forth between homes--cooking together, talking, taking care of one another's children, shopping, and going out together for entertainment...Holidays, birthdays, and other special occasions are usually celebrated with compadres, relatives, and their children. A special dinner is prepared, and people eat in several shifts if no table is large enough to accomodate all the guests...The strong network of intergenerational relationships provides a means by which traditions can be readily passed on. (Horowitz, 1983: pp.-58-9)

According to Horowitz' references (Mintz and Wolf, 1950; Gibson, 1966), the compadrazgo system originated in sixth century Mexico and was widely adopted during the colonial period, "when an epidemic caused significant depopulation and compadres became accepted as substitute parents" (Horowitz, 1983: p. 243, n.5). There is some evidence that this system, while important in rural areas, becomes even more crucial (for economic survival) in urban areas like Chicago (Lomnitz, 1977).

The network of about 45 people we are working with is only a subset of a larger group of kin and compadres which numbers over a hundred people; these 45, then, are the closest kin and compadre connections with whom interactions are much more frequent (at least weekly and, for some, daily) than they are with other members of the larger group (whom we have met infrequently on various occasions). One interesting aspect of this network is that it is spread over two countries. Movement

is almost continual in both directions between Chicago and the two ranchos in Mexico (one in Guanajuato and one in Michoacan) from which the center family's husband and wife emigrated. (A rancho, as many of you know, is a very, very small village in a rural area.) Some network members live in Chicago (visiting Mexico from time to time), some live in Mexico (and visit Chicago every few months), some live for years in Chicago and then for years in Mexico, and others come to Chicago annually (for up to half a year) to earn income. Moreover, whereas both men and women live in Chicago from the Michoacan rancho, only men from the Guanajuato rancho live in Chicago (their wives and children remain in Mexico, receiving financial support from Chicago). In this case, a community from one rancho is effectively spread over two countries. The world is indeed shrinking.

Three of us are doing participant-observation among this social network: myself, Lucia Elias-Olivares (a sociolinguist in UIC's Department of Spanish, Italian, and Portuguese), and Juan Guerra (a Ph.D. student of mine in UIC's English department). We are also carrying out ethnographic interviews of all the members of the network, and have done considerable informal audiotaping of discourse in the homes of members as well as in public settings in the neighborhood (e.g., community organizations, local political meetings, and block club meetings). Thus our data consist of field notes from participant-observation, transcribed interviews, and transcribed audiotaped discourse from private and public settings. The data drawn on for this

presentation are from field notes and interviews (including those based on our pre-formed questionaire and those conducted spontaneously).

Fairly early in our project I began to notice a repeated pattern of self-education in literacy among the men; within our network, it involves men in their mid to late 30's who are from the rancho in Guanajuato, although I have been told essentially the same story by other men in this community--who are not part of this network--from other ranchos in Mexico. This patttern is not, however, typical of the men in our network from the rancho in Michoacan. The differences between the two ranchos--primarily economic, but also geographic--account for the fact of self-education in literacy in the one case and school-learned literacy in the other. (I thank Juan Guerra for a description of these differences from his visit to the two ranchos.) The rancho in Michoacan is located immediately off a highway and the local "market" is less than 2 kilometers away--a walkable distance; during recent years, moreover, a rise in prices for avocados has brought this area increased prosperity. The rancho in Guanajuato, in contrast, is over 13 miles from the nearest city and there is infrequent public transportation to and from it--without a car, it's a very long walk; moreover, it is economically impoverished compared to the Michoacan rancho. It should not be surprising, therefore, to find that men from the Guanajuato rancho were unable to go to school for very long, if at all, because they were put to work as children.

Interestingly, the women I have talked to (from the Michioacan rancho) say they stopped going to school, usually after either primaria (elementary school in the U.S.) or secundaria (junior high in the U.S.), because of the need to take care of someone in the social network, e.g., a sick grandmother.

Our center family husband estimates that he went to school for a "maximum of about three months" at two different ages, first when he was eight (for a month and a half), and some time later, when he was put in third grade (for another month and a half). He says the reason he couldn't go to school was that he had to work:

> Y ah, es que teniamos que trabajar. Mira, como no habia la jefa, mi papa siempre estubo acá en Estados Unidos. Entonces pues teniamos que trabajar para comer...o sea que a los ocho años ya empieza uno a trabajar en Mexico. Desgraciadamente alla, tienes ocho años ya puedes caminar bien, tienes que ir a ver los animales, que se yo.
>
> {*Since our mom was not around and my dad was usually in the States, well, we had to work to eat...in other words, already at eight one starts to work in Mexico. Unfortunately, there, when you are eight and can walk well you have to go look over the animals, and other things.*}

This description is similar to Spufford's (1981) discussion of literacy among working class rural Englishmen in the 17th century. Citing statistical analyses by Schofield and Cressy, she states:

> ...some degree of prosperity was necessary to spare a child from the labour force for education as soon as it was capable of work. So literacy was economically determined. (Spufford, 1981: p.126)

Spufford drew her own data from spiritual autobiographies, focusing on the poorest of the writers. One entry in particular, by Thomas Tryon (who learned to write as an adult), indicates the relationship between literacy and the economy:

> About five year old, I was put to School, but being addicted to play, after the Example of my young School-fellows, I scarcely learnt to distinguish my Letters, before I was taken away to Work for my Living...The first Work my Father put me to, was Spinning and Carding, wherein I was so Industrious and grew so expert that at Eight Years of Age I could Spin Four Pound a day which came to Two Shillings a Week. (Spufford, 1981: pp. 131-2)

Like the 17th century spiritual autobiographers, our men from the Guanajuato rancho learned to write and read outside of school. Thus they are "self-educated," but with an important qualification: someone, usually a friend, taught them their "letters." So they are self-educated in the sense of pursuing literacy themselves, but they learned to be literate in a social process. José (a pseudonym) puts it very well:

> Bueno, Juan, te voy a decir la pura verda', mira. No hay persona que se enseñe por su mismo a nada. Tiene que haber una base, tiene que haber una, un, un, un ¿Como te dijera? Nosotros decimos un pie. O sea una base para empezar porque, simplemente, para que tu te enseñas a algo tienes que aprenderlo de otro. Incluso en el trabajo. Anda trabajar a una, a una fábrica y no te vas a enseñar tu solo. Es posible que te enseñes tu solo pero viendo lo que esta haciendo aquella persona, verda'. Posiblemente, yo te puedo decir, Juan, vente a trabajar conmigo. No te vas a enseñar tu solo, tienes que ver a los demas.
>
> *(Well, Juan, let me tell you the whole truth. There isn't a person who can teach himself anything all by himself. There has to be a base. There has to be a, a, a, a, how can I tell you? We are talking about a leg to stand on. In other words, a base for beginning, because, simply, for you to teach yourself something, you have to learn from another. Including work. Go and work in a, a factory and you are not going to work*

by yourself. It is possible to teach yourself by yourself, but watching what someone is doing. I can tell you, Juan, come to work with me. You are not going to learn alone; you have to watch the others.)

When José was nine or 10 a teacher began to give classes in his rancho, but he couldn't go to school because he had to work. According to José, those who didn't go to school learned some of the letters from those who did go to school. Later, during his second few months at school, he learned more letters and how to put them together to form his name. After that, he learned reading and writing by himself (not at home, but "in the street"), practicing with such things as empty cigarette boxes, which he used both for reading and for writing. Here is how he describes the process:

> No, en la ca-, en la calle. Si, por ejemplo, bueno, por ejemplo. Tu traes un, una cartilla de cigarros y, y, y alli, te, te ya, yo ya conocia las letra', verda', ves las letras y dices, pues, esta es esta, y esta, si, verda', y las vas juntando, en-, entonces ya despues te vas, vas empezando a practicar tu mismo y, y hasta que llega el dia que ya conociendo todas las letras, las puedes juntar. Entonce' yo despues empecé a escribir solo, a escribir. Y, y, y cuando, le' platicaba a mis amigos, "Mira, fijate que ya se escribir, y esto ya se, se escribe asi de este modo, de este otro." Entonce' segui pract-, practicando y practicando...
>
> ...algunos amigos alli ya mayores tenian revistas, cuentos, si revistas his-, de historietas les d-, aha. Y me las prestaban. E- entonces, como en esas revistas me gustaba leer y, y yo creo fue la base de donde me, donde aprendi yo mas tambien, porque ya cuando empiezas a leer una revista, cuando terminas una revista y la lees completa ya alli, ya vienen case toda' las, las, las palabras, e-entonces se me, se me fue mejor, o sea si, fui mejorando el, el, la lectura mia. Pa' escribir pues, eso si batalle mas, pa eso si era ver'a mas complicado. Pero, cajetilla de cigarros que me encontraba por alli tirada y today la dejaba rallada. Yo traia m-un lapiz y lo sacaba y, y, y me acordaba de lo que habia leido en la revista. Y las ponia a veces

que le sobraban letras, a veces le faltaban. Pero era parecido.

No, in the st-, in the street. Yes, for example, well, for example--you have a box of cigarettes and you begin to notice the letters and you say, well, this one is this one, and this one, yes, right, and you go putting them together, then later you begin to practice it yourself, and then one day you know all the letters, you put them together. Then later I began to write by myself, to write. And when, talking to my friends, "Look, I can write," and "This is written this way, or that." And then I continued practicing, practicing and practicing...

...my friends would lend me magazines, stories, and other things which they had. I liked reading those magazines and I believe that they were the basis of my learning because when you read a magazine and finish it you have read all the words. So, my reading skills improved. When it came to writing it was more difficult. But if I found a package of cigarettes, I would write on it with the words I remembered from the magazine until the package was deformed. Sometimes there were left over letters and sometimes it was too short. But it was close.

A remarkably similar account is again given by Thomas Tryon, from 17th century England:

> All this while, tho' now about Thirteen Years Old, I could not Read; then thinking of the vast usefulness of Reading, I bought me a Primer, and got now one, then another, to teach me to Spell, and so learn'd to Read imperfectly, my Teachers themselves not being ready Readers: But in a little time having learn't to Read competently well, I was desirous to learn to Write, but was at a great loss for a Master, none of my Fellow-Shepherds being able to teach me. At last, I bethought myself of a lame young Man who taught some poor People's Children to Read and Write; and having by this time got two Sheep of my own, I applied myself to him, and agreed with him to give him one of my Sheep to teach me to make the Letters, and Joyn them together. (Spufford, 1981: p. 132)

In both settings, then, in different times and places, men learned literacy informally, primarily outside of school, with the help of friends (who themselves weren't very literate). This certainly makes quite a case for peer tutoring, if nothing else. But these accounts provide much more than a case for peer tutoring; they reveal much, in fact, about the nature of learning, especially literacy learning. Our data yield interesting information in three categories: first, in aspects of the process of literacy learning; second, in the social nature of learning, and, for Mexicanos, the important role friendship plays in this process; and third, in significant features of the setting which provide the "motivation" to learn to write and read.

The Process

As I have discussed already, both the men in our study and the spiritual autobiographers from 17th century England describe their learning of literacy as first learning the letters of the alphabet, then learning to put them together. Both José and Thomas Tryon indicate that they learned to read first, then learned to write, and they both refer to the latter as being more difficult than the former. Another man from the Guanajuato rancho, however, describes his process as the reverse: he learned to write (so that he could write letters home from the U.S.) but claims he still reads "only a little," part of the "anuncias" (announcements) in church and very little in

newspapers. He writes multi-page letters about every two weeks, and he does so very laboriously, forming quite large letters. He doesn't read regularly in his daily life: he may, of course, read signs and other environmental print, but for him apparently, this doesn't count as "reading." Here is how Santiago (a pseudonym) describes how he first learned to write, then, later, to read a little:

> Bueno, yo empeze a escribir cuando salia de mi tierra, cuando empeze a escribir pa' mi casa. Entonc' habia un señor que me decia, "mira asi, asi se hacen las letras," me las apuntaba, entonc' yo empeze a pa' pensar y a hacer le la lucha a escribir y, yo escribia, ya me empezaron a, me empezaban a contestar y yo me sentia contento porque, si me daba gusto lo que decia, no. Ya, ya, ya la estoy, ya la estoy haciendo...
>
> ...yo me ponia a escribir pa' mi casa /?/ me acuerdo que las primer carta que made me dure como dos dias, bueno despues del trabajo, pues me ponia /?/. Y entonc' yo escribia malechito como podia y, y, y me legaba la carta, /?/ lo que me contestaron pero no po- no podia yo leer las. Yo la daba a leer porque no podia. Hasta, despues ya con el tiempo ya fui a, poco a poquito a, a poderlas ir leyendo.
>
> *Well, I began to write when I went out of my country, and I began to write to my house. There was a man who would tell me, "Look, this is how they make the letters," and he would write them for me. So I began to think and try to write and I would write and they would answer me back and I was happy because of what their letters said. And I would think, yeah, I am doing it.*
>
> *...I would write to my house, I remember the first letter I wrote took me two days to write, well, after work I would work on it. So, I would write pretty badly, how I could, and then I would get a letter. But I could not read it and had someone read it for me. Later, with time, I learned how to read it, little by little.*

Because of these differing accounts we cannot conclude that either learning reading first or writing first is more "natural."

We do know, however, that both can be acquired without schooling, as a natural part of daily life, when people perceive a need for these skills. We also know a bit about how literacy is perceived by those coming to it on their own. Both José and Santiago, for example, recognized that writing, especially in English, is not an exact reflection of speech. In their own words:

> ...el ingles que yo escribia no, no, no era, no era esactamente como lo 'scriben en las escuela, o ni muchos menos siendo que yo lo escribia a manera que se pronuncia, o sea mas bien lo escribia yo en español. Seria, seria, seria decirlo asi, ve'da', yo lo escribia en español y, porque si a mi me decian, por ejemplo yo, preguntaba esto me decian o eso se llama coffee cup (whispers) coffee cup. Yo le ponia ve'da', como se pronuncia no, no, no le ponia l-l- las palabras, o sea que si se lo doy a leer a otra persona va a decir-
>
> *the English that I wrote wasn't exactly the way they write it in school. I wrote it the way it was pronounced, in other words, I wrote it in Spanish, that's how I would describe it. It wrote it in Spanish. Because if I would ask, what is this called and they would say, `coffee cup' I would put it how it was pronounced, I didn't put the words. So, if I am going to read to another person that is how I write it.*
>
> (en español) o sea que hay muchas palabras que yo confundo, eh. Yo ya leyendolas digo ah caray pos esto dice, pero ya que yo, yo escriba yo se que no las voy a escribir como debe de ser. Ahora puntos, acentos donde los lleva quien sabe, no engo idea. O sea, /a /?// que a la major pensandolo digo a carai pos si, a la mejor lleva el acento aqui, pero eso de que punto, coma y eso, d-, eso si no se nada. No mas las letras.
>
> *(in Spanish) in other words there are many words I confuse. But when I read I notice, oh, yeah, this has an accent or is pronounced like this. When it comes to periods, accents and commas, I have no idea. Sometimes if I really think about it I may be able to say, this has an accent, but in commas and periods I draw a blank. Only letters.*
>
> Porque e-e, los que aprendemos el, a leer y a escribir acá liricos que vamos a saber de qutografia, que vamos a saber donde va un, un, un acento, que vamos a saber

que 'onde esta un punto se tienen uno detener cuando esta leyendo, que sabe uno de eso? Uno le sigue derecho. Si o no? Yo no me fijo en eso que, esto un punto deberes de haberte parado un ratito no, pos yo ese punto ni lo vi. Estaba muy chiquito yo sigo pa' 'delante. M'entiendes? Y la gente que esta, que esta educado que t-, que ha tenido su escuela pos oye ve un punto y se para. O, o ve unos, unas rayitas alli que les dicen signos pos, ey, le dan su sonido al, al, a la lectura. Yo no, yo, parejo. Nada de bajadas y subidas, no, no, no, no que es eso?

Because as you know when you learn to how to read and write lyrically you don't know about accents, you don't know you must pause after a period. You don't care, you go straight ahead. I don't do that and if he would mention it, I would just say that it was too small for me to see so I didn't pause, you understand? And people who are educated take that into consideration and give sound to their reading. I don't, no low or high pitches of voice, what is that?

To learn "lyrically," José and Pancho explain, is to learn something on your own, not always without a teacher, but without books, purely with spoken language ("...lirico es el puro, eh, hablando vez, puro hablado, no hay nada, que no haya libros ni nada"). They use as an example not just literacy learning, but also learning to play the guitar--without formal instruction. It is worth noting that, while much of the practice in "lyrical" learning goes on without a teacher, even when there is a teacher, the learning situation is one-on-one, and for these men, something that happens between friends. This observation leads me to the second category for which our data yield information: the social nature of learning.

The Social Nature of Learning

I already have discussed how José (and the 17th century spiritual autobiographers) learned from friends who had had some schooling while they themselves were working as children. So minimal literacy skills had been acquired one-on-one from friends, along with much practice on any materials available, like cigarette packaging and magazines. When José and Santiago, like other men from the rancho in Guanajuato, began working in Chicago as young men (José was about 17 then), they felt a renewed need for literacy skills--to write letters to family and friends back home. José refers to this as a "personal obligation" and says that many people have learned to write for this reason. Because of compadrazgo, it would be especially important for Mexicans to maintain close relationships with kin and compadres even while they were far away. Literacy is, of course, an available technology to serve that function, although so is the telephone for the more prosperous. Now José and his family regularly use the telephone to talk to relatives in Mexico; Santiago, however, still relies on writing, not having achieved the level of prosperity that José has.

> ...el era del estado de Mexico siendo que yo lo conoci aqui en Chicago, y eramos muy amigos aqui in Chicago. Entonces pues muy sencillo, Juan, muchas de las veces tu encuentras algun amigo que en verdad es amigo verda, y cuando eso sucede el amigo si se preocupa por ti. Sin, pos yo digo sin ventaja, o son amigos, que decimos aca nosotros un amigo derecho que se, que te estima, entonces esa, esa es una de las, de las razones que yo creo que el me ayudo porque viendolo por el otro lado que le podria yo importar yo a el. Te imaginas, no somos ni siquiera vecinos ni parientes ni mucho menos. Entonces este hombre v-, creo que hizo mucho, mucho por mi.

...he was from the state of Mexico and I met him here and here we became very good friends. So, very simple, Juan, sometimes you find a friend who is really a friend and when that happens that person worries about you. Without getting anything out of it, they are friends as we say, straight up friends, who really care and so I think that was one of the reasons that he helped, because if we really look at it, why should he have cared? Can you imagine, we are not even neighbors or relatives. So this man did a lot, a lot for me.

Another way in which learning literacy is revealed as an intensely social process is found in the learning process itself. Both José and Santiago describe the emotional support of the friends who taught them to write and comment on the trust (confianza) that had to exist between them during this process. These friends were selfless and generous in their efforts to teach literacy, but also they were very supportive. As José explains it:

Eh, creo que, bueno yo ya sabia m-mas o menos, pero yo creo que de alli pa', para acá me empezé yo a...como te dijera, 'aprender mas de lo, de lo, de lo que crei que podia aprender.....Porque, en primer lugar, fijate que te voy a decir una cosa, cuando tu quieres aprender algo y hay alguien que te ayuda, te apoya si se puede aprender. Pero si en cambio tu tienes un amigo que en vez de que t-te apoye so empiece a reir de ti, que "¡Ah, mira que eres, eres un tarado no, no se te pega nada!" E-en fin te desanimas en completo.

I knew how to somewhat but I think that from there I began to, how would I say it? I began to learn more than I thought I could learn...because in the first place, I am going to tell you something, if you have someone to help you and really support your efforts instead of laughing at you and saying, "Oh, look you're so stupid, you can't grasp anything!" You become totally discouraged.

The Setting

Szwed (1981: p. 15) defines motivation as "the nexus at which reader, or writer, context, function and text join," and adds that reading and writing skills will vary according to differing degrees of motivation. Clearly, the men we are discussing here were highly motivated to learn literacy skills. What was the basis of this motivation? Using Szwed's definition, we can trace several aspects of the setting toward the nexus which yields motivation. First, the reader or writer (the participant in Hymes' terms) in this case were men with essentially no formal schooling who were working in a foreign country without competence in the dominant language there, and who had left an extended network of very close relatives and friends "back home."

In this context (Szwed's second aspect), these men felt, as Jose said, a "personal obligation" to maintain these connections, so they turned to an available technology--literacy--for long-distance communication. The problem, then, was how to learn to use this technology, a problem which, as we I have explained, was solved socially. As McDermott (AAA, 1989) said, in emphasizing the social nature of teaching and learning, "learning is something that happens between people; it occurs in the relations between people." Our data certainly support this view.

The third aspect which forms the nexus for motivation, according to Szwed, is function. Here the function of literacy was to communicate over a long distance with loved ones. Jose

describes the context in which he felt motivated to learn--in his case to improve--his literacy skills:

> ..afterwards when I came here, is when I became more interested in learning. So I think I learned better here...because I was far from my country and circumstances require that you learn because, well, can you imagine, if I had to ask someone to write a letter, for example, to my girlfriend, well, the person writing the letter would know before I did what it said, and who knows what he would write in it.
>
> You could almost say it was an obligation to learn, a personal obligation. And I think it is how many have learned. At least I think so because if a person has his wife, imagine if you ask a friend, no matter how good a friend he is, but to tell him, come on write a letter for my wife. What could happen is what I just said. Is he going to put what you say or add something. Maybe instead of saying hello he tells her to go to hell, only in worse language. So I think this is one of the major reasons as to why so many of us have learned to read and write.